

*Haley and
the Night Visitors*



Laurinda Wallace

Snow was falling steadily, blurring the edges of the driveway. Haley bounded from the kitchen door, nose jammed to the ground. Gracie laughed, watching the black Lab imitate a snowplow, snuffling through the fluffy white flakes.

It was Christmas Eve and the last of the supper guests had departed at least an hour before. Gracie shivered, pulling her jacket closer. The barest sliver of moon sat frozen in the sky, stars winking in the darkness. It was absolutely still as if the earth was holding its breath.

Haley stopped mid-sniff, raising her head, and cocking it at the large snowdrift semi-blocking the mouth of the driveway. She whined and trotted toward the pile of crusty snow.

“Haley, where are you going?” Gracie followed the dog, anxious for the warmth of the house.

Undeterred by her mistress’ voice, Haley reached the drift, and pushed her muzzle into the snow. She barked once and began digging.

“What’s the matter, girl? Is something buried in there?” Another discovery in a snowbank came to mind, which caused some hesitation to join the Haley’s efforts.

The dog continued the excavation, focused on her self-appointed task. Gracie looked around to see if there was a clue to what was hidden in the white depths. Haley loved chasing critters, but it seemed too cold for anything to be voluntarily creeping about. She kicked at a softer section, watching it collapse. Haley whined, investigating the small cavity. Sticking her nose deep into the dark recesses, the dog suddenly yelped and backed away.

“Great! Have you cornered some wildlife again?” Gracie groaned. A previous adventure with a skunk made her a tad wary.

Haley looked at Gracie, huffed in frustration and dug into the snow once more. A faint sound filtered from the depths. Gracie knelt, joining her dog in the search. Haley jumped back again, barking while Gracie dug her bare hands into the packed snow.

Her fingers went numb almost instantly. She thrust them into her pockets to thaw, locating the small flashlight she always carried. She shone it into the growing hole. A bit of red caught her eye before the black Lab pushed her way back into position.

“Hold on, Haley. I think I see a feed bag stuck in there. We need a shovel. Paws and fingers aren’t going to do this job right.”

Haley plunked herself down, panting. The expression on the dog’s face was clear. It was the “what are you waiting for” look. Taking the hint, Gracie dashed for the front steps and grabbed the shovel leaning by the door.

She carefully cut a perimeter with the pointed shovel around the bit of slippery polypropylene material. Haley began to whine and the muffled sounds from under the snow grew louder. Pulling at the bag, she finally felt it give. Jabbing the shovel once more against the snow, a chunk fell away, tumbling to the ground. Haley stuck her face in the hole and yanked the bag cleanly out of the snowbank.

Fumbling at the twine knotted around the bag, Gracie finally loosened the resistant cord enough to slip it off. Positioning the flashlight under her arm, she opened the bag, steeling herself for the worst. A pitiful “meow” emanated from the bag.

Four green eyes met hers and two orange kittens tumbled out, alternately meowing and hissing. Haley backed away from the bedraggled felines, tail wagging hopefully.

“Come on little guys. Who would do this to you especially tonight of all nights?” Gracie coaxed the smaller kitten to her. Lifting it up, she checked for injuries. Finding none, she reached for the larger kitten. It began purring, rubbing a dirty head on her coat. Scooping up both of them, she made for the house.

Haley circumspectly observed the cats while they were towed dry. Gracie opened a can of tuna and poured half and half into a saucer for the ravenous pair. Haley lay down near them, fascinated by their switching tails and happy purring. She sniffed the air and then lumbered to her bed in front of the fireplace.

“They’ll be okay, girl. You’ll have to negotiate a truce though,” Gracie said to the forlorn looking dog. “They’re a little skittish about you. Any ideas on naming our Christmas vagabonds?”

Haley closed her eyes as if in deep contemplation.

“I know. The little one can be Amahl and we’ll have to come up with something suitable for the other. How about Angel? It’s fitting for tonight.”

Haley’s eyes flew open and she woofed in approval.

“That’s settled then. We’ll figure out if we have a girl and a boy later. The biggest problem is a litterbox.” Gracie panicked momentarily, and then she remembered the bag of cat litter she kept in the back of the RAV4 in case she got stuck.

“Watch our night visitors my girl, and make sure they don’t get into trouble while I fix up a kitty potty.”

Haley lifted her head, thumped her tail, watching Gracie disappear through the doorway. Her head dropped and she stretched out, eyeing the kittens.

They couldn't seem to decide whether it was safe to explore the living room. The lure of the Christmas tree finally nixed their fears. They sniffed at the lower branches and Amahl tentatively batted a red ball ornament. Angel raised a paw to a mercury glass snowman, sending it twirling to the floor. Both cats jumped back, and then sat mesmerized by the tiny white lights threaded through the branches.

Rough pink tongues rolled out, smoothing their coats and shining small paws. Haley inched her way closer while Amahl and Angel were absorbed in their grooming ritual. Angel stopped mid-lick, assessing Haley's proximity. The Lab rested her muzzle on the carpet and whined. Both kittens arched their backs and ran under the tree. The large crèche caught their attention. They sniffed at the wooden figures, batting the shepherds over and pushing the holy family from the stable. They settled into the meager bits of straw, and curled up tightly against each other. Haley continued to crawl closer to the tree, finally ending her mincing pursuit by settling near the dismantled Nativity.

Gracie reentered the kitchen, setting a plastic storage container filled with litter down on the kitchen floor. It seemed a little quiet, and maybe that wasn't a good thing. Where were Amahl and Angel? She looked into the living room hoping the kittens hadn't destroyed the tree or mangled Haley. She smiled when she saw the adjustment to the crèche scene. A little peace on earth had found its way into her living room tonight. And all was calm.

Merry Christmas Readers!

